

# Industry Can Play a Role in Preventing Childhood Obesity

The food, beverage, restaurant, leisure, entertainment, and recreation industries can all be instrumental in preventing childhood obesity. American children and youth represent dynamic and lucrative markets. Food and beverage sales to young consumers exceeded \$27 billion in 2002. Similarly, young people are major consumers of the products and services of the entertainment, leisure, and recreation industries. Providing young consumers and their parents and families with the knowledge and skills to make informed and prudent choices in the marketplace is an essential obesity prevention strategy to complement other key strategies.

## Fast Food and Full Service Restaurant Industry

Increased consumption of food outside of the home has been one of the most marked changes in the American diet over the past three decades. Household income spent on away-from-home foods rose from 25 percent of total food spending in 1970 to nearly one-half in 1999. Consumption of away-from-home foods comprised 20 percent of children's total calorie intake in 1977, rising to 32 percent by 1996. While the qualities of fast food meals and full service restaurant meals may differ, both are typically high in calories and low in nutrients and served in large portion sizes. Fast food consumption is associated with a diet high in total calories and energy density but low in nutrient density. Children and youth aged 11 to 18 years visit fast food outlets an average of twice a week, and those who ate fast food consumed more total calories and fat, sweetened beverages, and less fruits, vegetables, and milk than those who did not consume fast food.

## Healthier Restaurant Menu Options

Consumer spending at restaurants is projected to rise by 18 percent at full service restaurants and by 6 percent at fast food outlets by 2020. While restaurants have begun offering healthier food options, most do not currently provide consumers with the calorie and selected nutrient content either of offered meals or individual food and beverage items, which would be useful for making healthier decisions.

Given these trends, full service and fast food restaurants should:

- continue to expand healthier-meal options and food choices—particularly for children and youth—through the inclusion of fruits, vegetables, low-fat milk, and low-calorie beverages;
- expand options for healthier children's meals;
- encourage parents to help their children make smarter eating choices;
- remind parents as customers to substitute side dishes and customize meals to their satisfaction; and
- provide general nutrition information that will help consumers make informed decisions about food and meal selections and portion sizes.

Consumer research is needed to identify the most effective types of information formats on menus for encouraging the selection of healthful options.

## KEY FACTS

Industry should make obesity prevention in children and youth a priority by developing and promoting products and information that will encourage healthy eating and regular physical activity.

Food and beverage industries should develop product and packaging innovations that address total calorie content, energy density, nutrient density, and standard serving sizes to help consumers make healthful choices.

Leisure, entertainment, and recreation industries should develop products and opportunities that promote regular physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviors.

Fast food and full service restaurants should expand healthier meal, food, and beverage options (including children's meals) and provide calorie content and general nutrition information at the point of purchase.

Food and Beverage Industry

Analysis of Americans’ food and beverage consumption habits reveals that foods and drinks that are high in calories and low in nutrients—such as sweet or salty snacks, soft drinks, and fruit-flavored beverages—make up at least 30 percent of the calories the average American consumes each day. Additionally, children are snacking more frequently on these types of energy dense foods and are not meeting the minimum recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

Reduced-Calorie and Nutrient-Rich Foods and Beverages

Consumer demand is an important driver of food and beverage industry decisions. However, significant profit incentives now exist for industry to develop foods and beverages that have fewer calories or are fortified with nutrients. The financial success of diet sodas and the greater availability of reduced-calorie foods and beverages are examples of how industry is continually seeking new ways to meet consumer demand, earn a profit, and have its products positively affect public health. Numerous opportunities exist for industry to influence consumers’ purchase decisions in terms of how it develops, packages, labels, prices, and promotes products.

Smaller Portion Sizes

Industry should explore, through research and test-marketing, the best approaches for modifying product packages—multi-packages with smaller individual servings or resealable packages—to promote consumption of smaller portions.

Leisure, Entertainment, and Recreation Industries

Although Americans now enjoy more leisure time than they did a few decades ago, sedentary and low-intensity activities often dominate leisure time. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 25 percent of adults are inactive in their leisure time. Children also have less free time—defined as time not spent eating, sleeping, attending to personal care, or at school—than they used to because more of their time is spent away from home in school, after-school programs, or daycare. The physical activity trend data for U.S. children and youth is very limited. The leisure, entertainment, and recreation industries can help reverse the physical inactivity trend by promoting active leisure-time pursuits, while at the same time, developing new products and markets.

Certain industry leaders who have introduced new products that promote physical activity indicate that they can create a significant market for these types of products. Additionally, a better understanding how Americans in general, and children and youth in particular, use their leisure time will help to determine ways of incorporating more physical activity into their lives.

Trend	Adults	Children and Youth
Available leisure time	Adults’ free time increased by 14% between 1965 and 1985 to an average of nearly 40 hours per week based on Americans’ Use of Time Study (Robinson and Godbey, 1999).	From 1981 to 1997, children aged 3 to 12 years experienced a decline in their free time by seven hours per week (Sturm, 2005a).
Leisure time physical activity	<p>There have been increases in reported leisure time physical activity among U.S. adults based on NHES, NHANES, BRFSS, and trend data on sports and recreational participation (Pratt et al., 1999; French et al., 2001).</p> <p>There was a slight increase in self-reported physical activity levels among adults, based on the 1990-1998 BRFSS, from 24.3% in 1990 to 25.4% in 1998 (CDC, 2001).</p> <p>There was a slight decrease in adults reporting no physical activity at all (from 30.7% in 1990 to 28.7% in 1998) (CDC, 2001).</p>	<p>An estimated 61.5% of children aged 9 to 13 years do not participate in any organized physical activity during their non-school hours and 22.6% do not engage in any free-time physical activity based on the 2002 YMCLS (CDC, 2003a).</p> <p>From 1981 to 1997, children aged 3 to 12 years experienced an increase in time spent in organized sports and outdoor activities (Sturm, 2005a).</p>

Table 1. Trends in Leisure time and Physical Activity of U.S. Adults, Children, and Youth  
NOTE: BRFSS is the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. NHES is the National Health Examination Survey. NHANES is the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys. YMCLS is the Youth Media Campaign Longitudinal Survey. YRBS is the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.